

Path for a Fruitful Life

THE CLUB

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SUMMER 2007

CC PUBLIC DOMAIN

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We face some big questions:

What are we here for? Where do we go after we die? What is good and what is bad? What is our moral relationship to the animals? Who are the priests and teachers worth learning from? Are multiple religions true or compatible in some way? Are there helpful principles to help us guide our actions?

Some of these big questions have occupied thinkers and religious seekers through the ages.

If we have plausible answers to these questions that simultaneously lead us in productive directions then we could have a guide for our minds and our hearts. Such a guide could give us a theme for our lives and guide posts for personal progress.

I will propose such a philosophical perspective that can help answer these important questions as well as illuminate a path for living that is productive for both individuals and society as a whole.

With a grand goal such as this, I hope you will bear with me to explain the underlying idea and then we will return to see if we indeed have answers to the big questions. Then I will suggest how this idea differs from some other traditions. The goal is to establish a path for a fruitful life that anyone can follow.

WHAT IS “KNOWLEDGE”?

The central concept that yields all others I will call “Knowledge” and propose a system that values this “Knowledge” and suggest the possible consequences of this. This Knowledge is like the common word knowledge but is broader. To distinguish this new concept we will spell it with a capital K.

Knowledge is all teachings, traditions, customs, and stories that pass from one generation to the next. Knowledge, in this expanded sense, includes literature and formal teachings, but also less formal works such as family recipes, laws, turns of phrase, traditions, architecture, and songs.

Knowledge is sometimes explicitly taught and sometimes just absorbed by others. This Knowledge is the library of life in a large sense.

Knowledge is received from our parents and those around us and is passed on to others—Knowledge in that sense flows through us. Everyone adds Knowledge as it passes through them to the next generation since each person has their own story, has their own point of view which molds how they interact and leave their mark on generations to come.

So Knowledge is created all the time. Some people are more effective at creating Knowledge than others. People who lead dramatic or inventive lives will often create stories that are repeated and passed on. Those who teach more people would generally have more of an effect on future generations than those who do not interact much with others.

But not every action is significant or memorable so we are not so expansive as to assign every conversation or interaction an equal importance in our Knowledge collection. Knowledge passes from one generation to the next, enduring the erosion of time, in this definition.

To put it another way, Knowledge is an artifact that moves from generation to generation. This broad definition does not connote correctness or even usefulness, but rather this Knowledge is only special in that it survives generational leaps. Most Knowledge will only make it one generation, but some Knowledge is passed on fur-

ther through stories, traditions, language, as well as physical changes to the environment.

CREATION AND PROPAGATION OF KNOWLEDGE

Knowledge is created by living creatures when they do things that are repeated by others. This may sound broad, and it is, but I hope to establish that it is useful nonetheless. As examples, developing a useful medical procedure is creating Knowledge when it is repeated by other practitioners. Scientific discovery creates Knowledge when it is shared since others can understand and build it on. Even building a building is creating knowledge since it shapes the world of others. Writing a book is a way to pass on Knowledge, but this would only be true if the book were read and impacted the behaviors of others. Not all books pass this test. More passive activities create less Knowledge unless they lead to something repeated or permanent. In this way, being a tourist, sleeping, cleaning house, commuting—in other words, most of what we do, does not create Knowledge, at least not very quickly.

Another activity, propagation of Knowledge, is as important as creation in this Knowledge valuing system. Bearing and rearing children directly propagates Knowledge. Repeating what has been learned from others can be done formally or informally, but both ways lead to preservation of Knowledge by instilling or inspiring the next generation. In this sense, Knowledge is preserved and propagated by such practices as medicine, law, and business when methods affect others and are taught in the mean time.

Establishing the increase or decrease in the total amount of Knowledge, may sound impossible or pointless, but I hope I can overcome both objections since it will be important for the original goal of this essay: to chart a path for a fruitful life.

Knowledge, taken in total, indicates the complexity of the living system. If the system can be described in simple terms, there is not much Knowledge there. Information Theory might be helpful to quantify total Knowledge. A theory of information, created by Claude Shannon, worked to quantify the information content in a string of letters by wringing out the redundancy—the more redundancy, the less information. If something is repeated over and over verbatim that does not mean that it is

adding to the information content. Certainly having every child only sing the same set of children's songs is a less complex environment than one of millions of different children's songs. Therefore, total Knowledge would be the amount of different information that is known and taught.

Not to be obsessive about the analogy of information theory, but there is a difference. In the Information Theory of Claude Shannon, a random set of letters contains the most information since there is no redundancy to be eliminated. But a random list of letters would not strike most people as knowledge in the conventional sense. Knowledge has to mean something, it must be valuable enough to want to "know" it. So while we have a way to quantify information, we would need a way to not count useless information to try to quantify Knowledge. By our definition of Knowledge, this value might be quantified by the lengths that one generation will go to teach or pass on this information to another generation, or the lengths that another generation will try to learn the information.

The total Knowledge is the sum of all the information that is taught or passed to the next generation. The more different traditions and ideas that are passed on will increase the total Knowledge. Granted, this is still a bit vague, we can have some concept of the total Knowledge.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF KNOWLEDGE

This broad sense of Knowledge is central to the path I set out to describe. More specifically the central aim of life, I propose, involves creating and propagating Knowledge. If we judge activities by their effect on total Knowledge we can find an understandable system that can serve as a moral compass and help answer the big questions.

Therefore, I propose that fruitful lives of people, or more broadly, of living creatures have a positive effect on the Knowledge passed to next generations. And vice versa, increasing the total Knowledge passed on to the next generation leads to fruitful lives.

GOOD ACTIONS

Can it be this simple? Before judging the validity of this claim, let's detail it a bit further. "Good" activities lead to an increase in total Knowledge, and "Bad" the opposite. As shorthand for a piece of Knowledge, let's call it a "story" in a broad sense. If it is "good" to increase the total amount of Knowledge, then this can be broken down into 3 "good" practices:

- 1) to create stories worth repeating,
- 2) to pass on the worthwhile stories of others, and importantly,
- 3) to not destroy the diversity and richness of the stories and traditions that others will pass on.

This does not specify a relative value of stories based on. The Bible, Koran, Mahabharata, Torah and other sacred books, in this view are stories or Knowledge that is passed down. Directions to make atom bombs and the polio vaccine are also Knowledge. The effect of spreading these stories, however, is often very different. Therefore all actions are not the same value, from the perspective of increasing Knowledge. Some stories spread better than others. But just spreading better can be negative overall if it destroys other ideas. The best ideas are ones that, on a whole, lead to more ideas.

In studying scientific literature, attempts have been made to find important papers by finding ones that have been cited often. These papers are ones that have probably lead to further work that was accepted into the scientific literature thus it would be good under these precepts.

Some ideas foster new ways of viewing our world and these have been generally valued. For instance Freud's theories allowed many others to study people's emotions and motivations. Darwin's ideas have lead to a further work in evolution and genetics.

Therefore important Knowledge leads to many new ideas. This is not to say that some pre-existing Knowledge is permanent—in fact, important ideas often render old ideas obsolete and therefore will not be repeated as often or at all. But on a whole important ideas could be seen to create more Knowledge than they replace, and this could, in turn, help understand the value of the original ideas.

NATURAL ORIGINS OF KNOWLEDGE

Knowledge, in this broader sense than we have been discussing, does not have to be limited to stories passed down by people to people. A living creature's DNA can be seen as Knowledge that is refined and passed on over time. DNA sequences are changed through mutation and successful ones are passed down to viable offspring. Particularly good sequences spread to all members of a species over time and some just contribute to variation within the species. Sequences that are repeated through many generations and into many individuals would correspond to a story or idea that is passed down from human parent to child.

Species that split off into new species would also correspond to new Knowledge being created. The extinction of a species would be a loss and be seen as not "good" unless there was compensation that balanced the loss.

In a narrow sense, life as a collection of species can be described as healthy when it grows more diverse. An environment can be described as less healthy as biodiversity shrinks. In this way we can include the life of other creatures into the definition of Knowledge. Creatures create new Knowledge and pass it down generations; the total of all species can be summed to create an idea of total Knowledge.

The idea of Knowledge being passed down through generations can therefore be seen as having its roots in all life. The creation and transmission of Knowledge can be seen as an artifact of all life forms.

The total amount of Knowledge in all species is, in theory, discoverable and has recently become the goal of a few projects. The 10-year Census of Marine Life project is attempting to count the number of individuals of each species of fish and how it changes over time. The Encyclopedia of Life project is starting to build a database of all the species known and some of their characteristics. A related project is Craig Venter's Global Ocean Sampling Expedition project which seeks to estimate the biodiversity in microbial life in the seas. With these studies we can start to understand the aggregate biodiversity and how it varies over time.

So in the natural world sense, we can think of Knowledge as having had its origins in reproductive life. Some of the Knowledge of the animals is passed down in its genes as the language of species.

LANGUAGE AS AN ACCELERATOR

In humans, the invention of language and then writing has accelerated the transmission, creation, and preservation of Knowledge. This literature could be communicated over great distances and others then could build on the new ideas. The ideas could grow more subtle and could last as long as anyone cared to read and repeat them. While not all Knowledge is captured in language and writing, these technologies had a multiplier effect in development speed and preservation capacity beyond evolutionary biology or the tasks taught by parents in most species.

The longevity of some of language-based stories is a testament to the value we have placed in this Knowledge over time-- songs of ancient Hebrews are still sung in ceremonies today and Homeric tales are thought of as some of the great stories even today. A language itself, based on its vocabulary and structure, reflects a set of values of the culture it came from which may be one of the richest forms of cultural inheritance.

KNOWLEDGE HELPS ANSWER THE BIG QUESTIONS

At this point, you may grant that Knowledge is important, but may not grant its central role in the establishment of a useful moral order. I hope we can help establish this partly by going back to the big questions listed in the beginning and see if the concept of Knowledge can help answer these in a consistent way.

For instance, "What are we here for?" By the definition proposed in this essay we are here to create and propagate Knowledge. Since this is solved by definition it does not serve to help see if this concept of Knowledge helps answer this one.

WHERE DO WE GO AFTER WE DIE?

The question of “What happens to us after we die?” might be more helpful. The Knowledge that has flowed through us, and we have created, rejoins the mass of Knowledge that is passed on to the next generation. We are born with a set of genetic traits to a pair of parents who rear us—all of which is received Knowledge on which we thrive and survive. We then grow, learn, create, teach, and finally we die. We leave behind stories, offspring, and physical artifacts. Our Knowledge therefore joins back into the flow of the world from which it came. A productive, or fruitful, life would leave new concepts and new life on this earth. So after we die we leave a lasting impact on the pool of Knowledge. Therefore our lasting impact, our legacy, and in some sense our re-incarnation, is in effecting the Knowledge of future generations.

RELATIONSHIP TO THE ANIMALS

Coherent answers to “What is our relationship to the Animals?” and relatedly “What are our moral responsibilities in dealing with animals?” would be helpful as the problem of diminishing biodiversity is seen as increasingly important. With the concept of Knowledge we have a direct answer—all living creatures hold stories and Knowledge worth transmitting. If a species is destroyed then we cut short a whole line of history. Sometimes species would naturally terminate, but hopefully it is replaced by greater diversity and growth rather than the net loss of Knowledge on earth.

So animals are teachers as well as creators and propagators of Knowledge and therefore must be respected by people or we will diminish the total Knowledge.

GOOD AND BAD

By this line of reasoning, the creation and propagation of Knowledge is Good and in contrast, the destruction of Knowledge is Bad.

The more Good acts of living creatures yield a greater abundance of Knowledge for future generations.

Such a simple definition of Good and Bad seems to be consistent with some civilized traditions. For instance—

What about Suicide? Good or Bad? Bad—as it does not help in creating and propagation Knowledge.

Wiping out a species? Clearly Bad as explained before.

Extinction of a human language? Bad since a language holds stories not just expressed in the language, but in the fabric and development of the language itself.

Murder, slavery? All obvious cases of bad.

Furthermore, isolating our elderly citizens in retirement homes will not serve to pass their Knowledge in ways that a thoughtful integration could do.

How about the propagation of Disney Films around the world? I would say this is a net loss of Knowledge since it seems supplants a diversity of children's stories with a monoculture. This amounts to a sin in this scenario. For that matter, a current issue on the Internet, restrictive copyright laws that are now keeping out-of-print works from passing to new generations is a Bad behavior.

The spread of McDonalds, Coca Cola, Walmart, and MS DOS all raise issues in this light by spreading monocultures. Certain levels of efficiency would encourage Knowledge transmission, but this goal is not served as monopolies keep new ideas from being creating and spreading.

PRIESTS, GURUS, AND MONKS

If this is a form of moral system, like a religion, then we can explore the roles in those traditions to determine if analogous roles exist.

Church leaders, such as priests or rabbis, teach core principles to a broad audience. In a Knowledge-valuing tradition we might have the equivalent principles, but I do not

believe there are full-time professionals that currently play the role of teaching others a moral system based on these principles. It seems that some of these values are part of the general upbringing of all people, but the distinction of right-and-wrong based on these principles is not taught or widely held.

More interestingly, there may be the equivalent of “Gurus” starting to appear. Gurus might be thought of as those who come up with new ways to follow a path. In this way gurus create new structures for passing on Knowledge. I would suggest that some gurus are emerging in the area of Information Technology and law. The computer field, or “Information Technology” could be seen as new enabling systems of Knowledge transmittal and preservation. But, of course not all computer systems foster Knowledge. For instance the millions of hours spent on most video games could be seen as Knowledge neutral or a net loss. When Knowledge is neither created nor preserved, then we have stalled progress.

Some systems of Law have stalled the increase in Knowledge such as laws that push creative works that are out-of-print into obscurity which means that no one can use these materials. In other law systems such as in the United States before 1976, these works would have gone quickly into the public domain and could have been read and passed on freely, but laws since 1976 have made it so that out-of-print works may not be copied or passed on. These laws would be classified as Bad.

Some people tried to find a way around these laws in the area of Information Technology such as Richard Stallman who created a system of Open Source Software which has made advances in taking works that would otherwise have been lost and allowing them to be used by future generations. Richard Stallman could be seen as a guru in this Knowledge valuing tradition. As another example, Larry Lessig created the Free Culture movement and the Creative Commons to help get around the Knowledge destroying laws of the last few decades. Harold Varmus helped start the Public Library of Science as a way to get around the effective corporate control of scientific literature that has emerged recently. Chuck Vest initiated the Open Courseware project which makes the classroom materials of MIT openly accessible on the Internet leading to widespread use of these materials beyond that institution. These individuals have started systems for Knowledge increase and could be thought of as gurus.

Monks, on the other hand, tend to the faithful preservation of traditions by learning, copying, and refining traditions. This might be analogous to librarians and archivists

who work with preservation and access to written works that have been passed down through the ages. Interestingly, we could even judge the value of librarians in this way. Librarian's actions could be distinguished by their overall effect on passing on Knowledge—some have suspected that some extreme practices of preservation may increase longevity at the expense of accessibility therefore diminishing its value to the current and future generations. For instance, Bill Gates' company Corbis bought a prominent image archive, the Bettmann Archive. This archive had been used by thousands of people in midtown Manhattan, but was subject to wear and tear of that usage. After the purchase some of it was digitized and made available much more broadly than before, and the other works, maybe as high as 98% of them were put in an abandoned mineshaft in Pennsylvania leading to better preservation but much less access. This preservation and controlled access, while admirable in some ways, could lead to a loss of Knowledge in the world and therefore could be seen as a negative approach in this worldview. Another case is the current decision that librarians are facing on how to interact with commercial companies that want to digitize works in their collections. Those working with Google, for instance, on book digitization, have signed onto restrictions on their ability to use the digital versions of public domain. Librarians are trying to decide if this commercial company, while limiting access to only its own website, will yield higher visibility than working with more open projects that have less funding and therefore will be more limited in their scanning. Having a framework for making these decisions could be helpful to these professionals.

Therefore, traditional professions in the religious realms, the monks and gurus have analogous representation in a Knowledge-valuing tradition, but the role of priest does not seem to. If this tradition becomes more accepted, one way to detect this might be by the rise of public educators of the values in this tradition.

COMPARISONS TO OTHER TRADITIONS

A Knowledge-based value system does not seem to be a religious system, at least as far as traditionally understood, but it might be illuminating to compare it to other moral systems in any case.

JUDIASM, CHRISTIANITY, AND ISLAM

The “religions of the book”: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have a strong tradition in preserving some Knowledge for future generations. I was struck by this reverence at a Bar Mitzvah recently when a scroll copy of the central book, the Torah, was brought out from a alter-like box and ritually paraded around the room, kissed by many participants, and then read by the new initiate as the test of membership. The requirement of new members being the ability to read the Torah is testament to the importance of faithfully passing knowledge from one generation to another. For Christians, readings from the New Testament and the Koran for Muslims also accompany most religious ceremonies and gatherings. These systems seem to concentrate only on very few books, and while commentary and additions has been allowed, the basic texts are very few and quite stable.

Furthermore, these traditions exclude other religions. The first commandment in the Old Testament is “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.” In “Ein Keloheinu” a jewish hymn says, “None compares to our God, none compares to our Guide, none compares to our Ruler”. These statements make other traditions incompatible and are excluded. While these religious traditions may be valuable in preserving a set of stories, it is not the same as the Knowledge valuing tradition we have been talking about since these religions define narrowly what should be passed down.

SCIENCE

Science, on the other hand, is closer in many ways to a Knowledge-valuing system. Building and preserving a scientific literature is the goal in this tradition. Adding to the scientific literature is the goal of each scientist. New papers are gladly accepted into the scientific literature as long as they conform to the basic tenants of scientific research. Challenging and replacing the theories of passed scientists is celebrated and rewarded. In fact, the number of accepted papers and the importance of these often measure a scientist’s standing. The scientific method as refined in the 17th century has proved productive for four hundred years, making it a set of ideas that others have used to create Knowledge. Based on logic, evidence, and cause-and-effect scientists have been able to describe and predict a great many phenomena. Science and the re-

sulting scientific literature is meant to describe what is true. The difference between scientific literature and the Knowledge we have discussed is that Knowledge accepts all repeated traditions whether they are scientifically true or not. The scientific literature leverages a rational system and attempts to achieve objective truth, where Knowledge incorporates all that is passed on from one generation to the next.

AKASHIC RECORD OF THEOSOPHY

Another system that celebrates a wide range of knowledge is Theosophy and its “Akashic Record.”

According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, the “Akashic Records in occultism, a compendium of pictorial records, or ‘memories,’ of all events, actions, thoughts, and feelings that have occurred since the beginning of time.” This definition seems similar to the Knowledge described here. This was reinforced when Rudolf Steiner said, “these imperishable traces of everything immaterial are called in occult science the ‘Akashic Records Occult Science, p. 108.

The Britannica, however, goes on to say, “The Akashic Records are reputedly accessible to certain select individuals—e.g., a spiritualist medium who conducts a séance.” Thus the Akashic record is more the wisdom of all ages that are to be tapped through mystical experiences. This differs from a Knowledge that is limited to that which is currently being passed from one generation to the next. The idea that the records are not accessible to most people is not compatible with a Knowledge-valuing tradition. Furthermore, preserving and creating more Knowledge to pass to the next generation does not seem to be a goal in the theosophy teachings that incorporate the Akashic Record. Therefore some of the ideas are similar but the Record plays an essentially different role.

INTERPRETATION OF THE TAO

The Tao, in Chinese philosophy, can be seen as a river from which we are born and we are, cumulatively, the river itself.

From the Tao Te Ching, the central book in Taoism, was written around 500BCE as a guide for the ruling class of China:

*TAO is forever flowing.
And yet it never overflows in its effectiveness.
It is an abyss like the ancestor of all things.*

...

It seems to be earlier than God.

Tao Te Ching: The Book of Meaning and Life. Penguin Books. (c) 1978, 1985. Page 3.

Short chapters describe a TAO and the desirable behaviors of men:

*There is no greater sin than many desires
There is no greater evil than not to know sufficiently
There is no greater defect than wanting to possess.*

IBID page 31.

The TAO as a source and destination for all life, including its appearance with the start of the world, has some consistency with the idea of Knowledge. The positive behaviors described are consistent with those that act and teach in ways that others can learn from. Possession and commands are not seen to be enduring or good.

The approach to morality and the TAO as the source of life posed in the Tao Te Ching might be usefully thought to be related to the propagation of Knowledge and the broad concept of Knowledge itself. Fully exploring this possibility would be a paper in itself, so I will leave this as a possibility.

In comparing the proposed Knowledge-valuing to other systems, it doesn't seem to have a direct analogy, but might be useful as a superset that allows these other systems to be explained in the context of common goods.

POSSIBLE CRITIQUES

While there may be many criticisms of a Knowledge valuing system as described here, I would like to address two, namely that it is similar to moral relativism and that it is too vague to be concretely helpful in making real decisions.

Moral relativism holds that ideas of any society are valid from its own perspective and there is no objective truth or moral system. Many different behaviors can be seen as “good” and one can not criticize another’s actions because their actions might be seen as “good” from another, and therefore equally valid, approach. Moral relativism has been criticized for justifying the promotion of ideas that are destructive or unproductive. If all ideas are valid, the argument goes, then it is not worthwhile to pursue the creation and promotion of better ideas.

While it is true that any idea from any society would be seen as part of Knowledge as a whole, it does not necessarily follow that they are equally valid. The Knowledge-valuing system, as a whole, sees the creation and propagation of Knowledge as worthwhile. Therefore, the assertion of moral relativism that there are many incompatible moral systems all having the place as the ultimately correct system does not hold. Furthermore, the individual moral systems of different societies would not be seen as equally valuable in a Knowledge oriented philosophy. Some moral systems will yield and greatly enhance the future creation and propagation of Knowledge and these systems are seen as more worthwhile.

The criticism that the pursuit of Knowledge, in this broad sense, is too vague to be concretely helpful or motivating, is more difficult to refute. Day-to-day decisions based on these principles could be more difficult than in many current moral systems. But others have proposed moral systems that are difficult to pre-judge the results, such as Mill’s Utilitarianism. In that tradition, the goal was to increase global utility, which could be at least as hard as a guide as increasing Knowledge. Moreover, many people are adopting goals that share some similarity to expanding the world’s Knowledge. For instance the growing interest in Global Warming and preserving the ecology of the earth have very broad goals of preservation of life on earth yet have been gaining adherents. The ecological movement and concern of Global Warming both come from observations on the finite nature of life on earth. This finite nature invites quantification and trend analysis. This realization of the finite extent of nature could have been the genesis

of the concern over its preservation. Something similar is happening in the area of Knowledge. The Internet has exposed millions to a broader range of ideas than was easily accessible before. The first papers on trying to quantify the total information content of human expression were only written in the last few decades (Michael Lesk and later Peter Lyman). Search engines are attempting to incorporate all information that might be relevant to anyone in the world thus yielding studies in quantity. This new envisioning of “all information” could be a precondition of a system that would value “all Knowledge” as an analog to the ecological movement to value all life.

Therefore this Knowledge valuing system may be currently vague, it may become more concrete as our concept of global information becomes more common, and furthermore as our concept of global information comes to be seen as more valuable.

PATH FOR A FRUITFUL LIFE

A Knowledge-valuing system therefore might be somewhat novel and may even be useful in answering philosophical or religious questions in a consistent way. But can following this system be a path for a fruitful life as originally posed in this essay? To answer this, let us briefly try to define what a fruitful life would be. In the sense that the fruit is the part of the plant that is sweet, plentiful, and carries seeds that propagate the species; then a fruitful life would be one of desirable qualities, bountiful aspects, and would help spread these characteristics for future generations. Merriam Webster’s dictionary defines fruitful as “conducive to an abundant yield,” and “abundantly productive.”

A life path based on creating and passing on Knowledge, in our broad sense, would encourage a life of learning from others so that existing Knowledge could then be passed on. Furthermore, the creation of new Knowledge requires discovering ideas and activities that have not happened before. These new activities generally require risk taking and adventures. Spreading Knowledge to others would then lead to broad interactions with others either directly or through writings. As the total Knowledge expands, diversity in the types of life and the ideas expressed expands. Therefore, and in conclusion, the Knowledge-valuing life would tend to lead to a life that is “conducive to an abundant yield” and could be seen as a path for a fruitful life.